

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **CABINET**

DATE: **TUESDAY, 21 APRIL 2015**

REPORT BY: **CHIEF OFFICER (GOVERNANCE)**

SUBJECT: **WEBCASTING OF MEMBER MEETINGS**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.01 For Cabinet to consider a recommendation from the Constitution Committee that Flintshire implements webcasting of those Member meetings of most interest to the public with officers investigating ways of doing so within available staffing resources.

2.00 BACKGROUND

2.01 In the last financial year Flintshire and other principal Councils in Wales received grant funding from the Welsh Government to enable them to investigate the use of remote attendance and webcasting of meetings. That resulted in remote attendance and webcasting being trialled at the meetings of the Democratic Services and Constitution Committees held on the 26 March 2014. In making its grant of £40K to the Council the Welsh Government made clear that it was a one off with no commitment to fund ongoing costs associated with either remote attendance or webcasting.

2.02 On the 15 August 2014 the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGGA) published guidance for Members on webcasting which was reported to the Constitution Committee and that guidance is attached as Appendix 1. Flintshire is one of the 12 authorities whose webcast is listed on page 9 of the guidance. Whilst most of those have used the same commercial supplier as for the Flintshire trial, Public-i, a few developed their own system. The guidance includes a list of what are seen as the benefits of webcasting, together with the challenges associated with it.

2.03 Whilst at the Constitution Committee meeting on the 15 October 2014 it was decided that no further action was to be taken at the present time in pursuing remote attendance at meetings, the committee decided that webcasting should continue to be explored. That led to a further report to the committee's meeting on the 28 January 2015. The committee agreed the recommendation in the report that due to the benefits of webcasting in terms of public engagement and transparency a recommendation to Cabinet be recommended to implement webcasting for those Member meetings of most interest to

the public with officers investigating ways of doing so within available staffing resources.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.01 With the exception of a few Councils who have devised their own webcasting arrangements the remaining Councils in Wales who have introduced webcasting have entered into contractual arrangements with Public-i. The Council's officers have made enquiries of the three Welsh Councils who have devised their own systems but officers believe the best option in Flintshire's circumstances is to use the Public-i system. Monmouthshire was one of the three authorities that devised its own system but this was as a result of a major investment in their Council Chamber through the installation of a new and up-to-date audio visual system. Following enquiries of the other two Councils that have devised their own systems officers believe the Public-i system is easier for staff and public to use.
- 3.02 Officers have obtained from Public-i quotes for different options for webcasting which have been sent to Cabinet members. In view of the commercial sensitivities of this information Members are asked to maintain the confidentiality of the figures quoted. The options include for webcasting of just the Council Chamber or both the Council Chamber and the Clwyd Room. The options also cover costs for either a one year or three year contract. The upfront costs and service costs for either type of contract could be met from the balance of the Welsh Government grant.
- 3.03 The other main challenge associated with webcasting besides the financial cost is the time required by staff to operate such equipment. Officers have made enquiries of both Conwy and Wrexham Councils of the staffing implications of webcasting those meetings of most interest to the public. Both Councils have fixed cameras in the Council Chambers but not in any other rooms. Without fixed cameras the staffing implications are considered too onerous for introduction in Flintshire.
- 3.04 Officers believe that for any webcast meeting there will be a need for an extra member of staff to attend to operate the cameras and align them to the microphones. In 2014 if meetings of the County Council, Cabinet and Planning had been webcast it is estimated that the staffing impact would have been an additional 152 hours of committee officer time. At a time when the review of Democratic Services is proposing to find budget savings through the loss of posts the additional workload involved in webcasting such meetings represents a significant challenge. It is considered that by confining webcasting to those meetings where there is a significant public interest such as meetings of the Planning and Development Control Committee and some Cabinet and County Council meetings this could be accommodated within available staffing resources. As indicated in the

Democratic Services business plan considered by Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny on the 22 January workload is to be reduced by, for example, no longer supporting meetings of informal bodies. The Chief Officer Governance in consultation with the Leader and Deputy Leader will make recommendations on this to the Democratic Services Committee.

- 3.05 As indicated in the WLGA guidance webcasting is now underway in most authorities in Wales for those meetings which are judged to be of most interest to the public. It also indicates that generally the number of website hits suggests that there is ongoing public interest in these broadcasts. Webcasting enables meetings to be viewed by more people than can be physically accommodated in the meeting room and for meetings to be viewed at a time convenient to individual members of the public. In view of the benefits of webcasting in terms of public engagement and transparency the Constitution Committee decided to recommend its introduction to Cabinet.
- 3.06 The Constitution Committee did not make a recommendation in relation to whether webcasting should be confined to meetings held in the Council Chamber or also cover meetings held in the Clwyd Room. It also did not make a recommendation as to whether the contract should be for one year or three years duration. It is considered the most cost effective option would be a 3 year contract to cover meetings in the Council Chamber.
- 3.07 In order to ensure webcasting works well it is considered that Council should be recommended to adopt the attached (Appendix 2) webcasting protocol to cover the following:-
- (a) The deemed consent of third parties and the public to webcasting meetings they attend.
 - (b) How long webcasts are to be retained on the Council's website
 - (c) That the minutes once approved remain the official record of the meeting

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.01 For Cabinet to agree to the introduction of webcasting of those meetings of greatest public interest namely meetings of the Planning and Development Control Committee and meetings of County Council.
- 4.02 That the Chief Officer, Governance be authorised to enter into a contract for 3 years for meetings held in the Council Chamber.
- 4.03 For the Chief Officer, Governance in consultation with the Leader and Deputy Leader to make recommendations to the Democratic Services Committee on how webcasting can be accommodated within available staffing resources

4.04 For the Chief Officer, Governance to recommend to Council the attached protocol on webcasting of meetings.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.01 The Council has previously received a one off grant from the Welsh Government of £40K of which a balance of £37K remains. The upfront cost and the service costs for either a year or a three year contract could be met from the balance of the Welsh Government grant.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

6.01 None as a result of this report.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

7.01 None as a result of this report.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.01 None as a result of this report.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.01 Each webcast meeting would require an extra officer to be in attendance and this would represent a significant challenge at a time of reducing staffing resources to find budget savings. The Chief Officer, Governance will consult the Leader and Deputy Leader and make recommendations on this to the Democratic Services Committee.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

10.01 None as a result of this report.

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 None as a result of this report.

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 Appendix 1 – Guidance for Members
Appendix 2 – Webcasting Protocol

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Questionnaires on webcasting arrangements at Conwy and Wrexham Councils.

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